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ABSTRACT

Several phenomena surrounding the institution of writing portfolio assessment in Kentucky schools have been observable and measurable for some time now, and many writing instructors in higher education have watched developments with delight and curiosity. One acknowledged benefit is the increased use of writing as a learning tool across the curriculum. A study tested the perception that students, as a result of Kentucky's portfolio assessment project, are better writers or at least more willing to write when they come to college. Both students and faculty at Morehead State University were surveyed, 748 freshmen and 28 faculty. Some of the students surveyed had completed portfolios and some had not. The student surveys showed that (1) students who completed portfolios wrote somewhat more than those who had not completed portfolios in high school; (2) neither group particularly enjoyed writing; however, (3) portfolio writers experienced more comfort with writing; and (4) that those who had completed portfolios were better writers. The faculty survey revealed that, contrary to some popular opinion, teachers have seen freshman writers fairly evenly holding their own or improving in basic skills, with many more seeing improvement in the last 5 years. Also, when it comes to being writers, first-year college students are demonstrating significant improvement in understanding the writing process and showing more comfort with writing. (Contains 17 figures.) (TB)

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Kathryn Mincey

The Impact of KERA Writing Portfolios on First-Year College Writers

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Process, Product, and Perception

Several phenomena surrounding the institution of writing portfolio assessment in Kentucky schools have been observable and measurable for some time now, and many writing instructors in higher education have watched developments with delight and curiosity. One acknowledged benefit is the increased use of writing as a learning tool across the curriculum. The KIRIS Holistic Scoring Guide, by emphasizing audience and conceptual issues rather than surface features, has driven instruction, which in turn has been supported by K-12 professional development promoting a complementary writing *process*. Student immersion in process terminology affords college writing instructors a common writing idiom with Kentucky high school graduates. Moreover, writing for "publication" has accompanied another KERA mandate, increased technology, in which Kentucky schools have finally reached an educational top ten. Consequently, we can expect our students to enter college with greater word processing skills as well as more writing experience.

In addition, by specifying some rhetorical genres and allowing choice of others, the portfolio enables the writer to prepare and publish a body of work with design, purpose and variety. Such a *product* can be used not only for assessment of students' K-12 progress but potentially as part of an index for placement and follow-up in college courses. These are just a few of the tangible benefits of student portfolio writing.

Less tangible and more difficult to measure, but perhaps more important, is an apparent improvement in student writing attitudes. Beginning in primary school to perceive themselves as

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writers (whose progress is measured by writing rather than standardized tests), students may conceivably develop respect for writing as a learning tool and self-respect through the power of expression. Such perceptions could certainly begin to ameliorate the perennial challenge college writing teachers have faced in motivating students. Therefore, some college writing teachers have begun to wonder if our casual *perception* that first-year college students are coming to us better prepared, or at least more willing, to write would be supported by objective data.

Context

To begin to examine the hypothesis, in the fall of 1995 we conducted a dual survey, one of first-year students and one of writing faculty, in the Department of English, Foreign Languages, and Philosophy at Morehead State University. The timing for an initial inquiry seemed appropriate, given the chronology of portfolio assessment implementation. The high school graduates of 1995 were freshmen in 1991-92, the first year for portfolios. They did not experience the rushed anxiety of preparing an eighth-grade baseline portfolio but had four years to develop toward the twelfth-grade portfolio. Students entering college in the fall of 1996 will provide data of comparative interest since they will be the first class to have prepared two portfolios.

Methodology

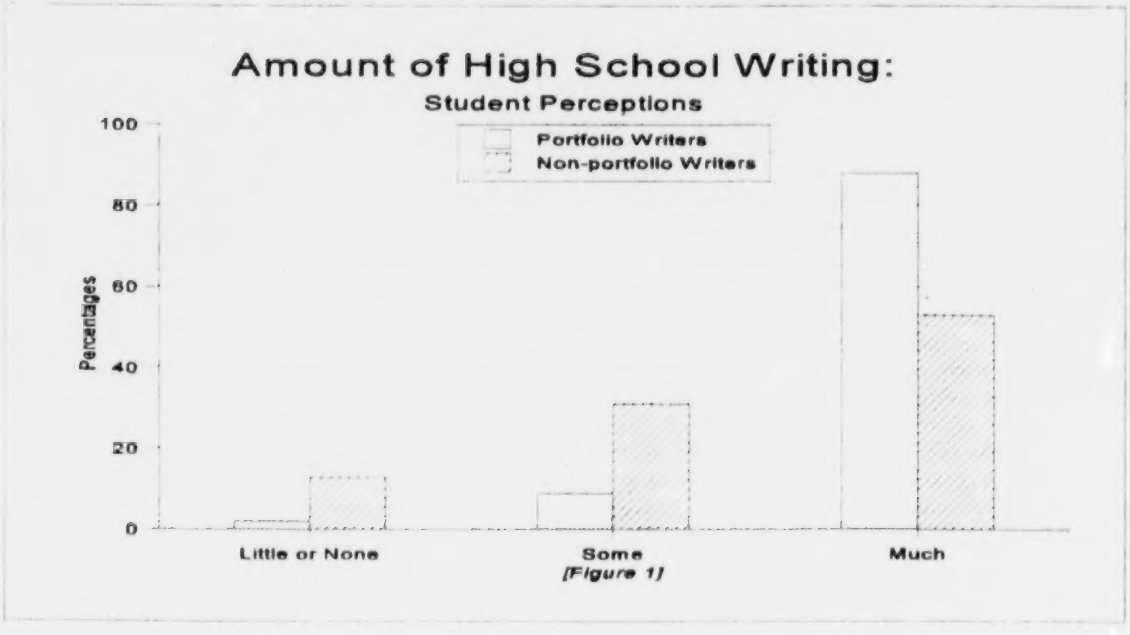
We administered our survey toward the end of the 1995 fall semester to allow students a balance between recollection of their twelfth-grade portfolio experience yet some experience with college writing. Student surveys were distributed by way of 36 writing faculty to potentially 1300 first-year writers. We received 748 usable student surveys (a return rate of 57.5%) from 98 students

in developmental writing classes, 595 in regular freshmen writing classes, and 55 in advanced freshman writing classes. The student survey determined whether the respondent had completed a high school writing portfolio and invited perceptual and attitudinal reactions to previous writing experiences as they relate to college writing experiences.

The faculty survey was distributed to all 36 members of the writing faculty, 28 of whom responded, for a return rate of 77.8%. Instructors were asked to indicate whether, over the past five years, they have perceived improvement, no change, or decline in first-year college students' writing skills, knowledge of the writing process, and comfort with writing. For consistency with student experience, the broad term, *writing skills*, was analyzed in the questionnaire by the six criteria on the KIRIS Holistic Scoring Guide: purpose and approach, idea development and support, organization, sentences, wording, and correctness, along with their respective sub-descriptors.

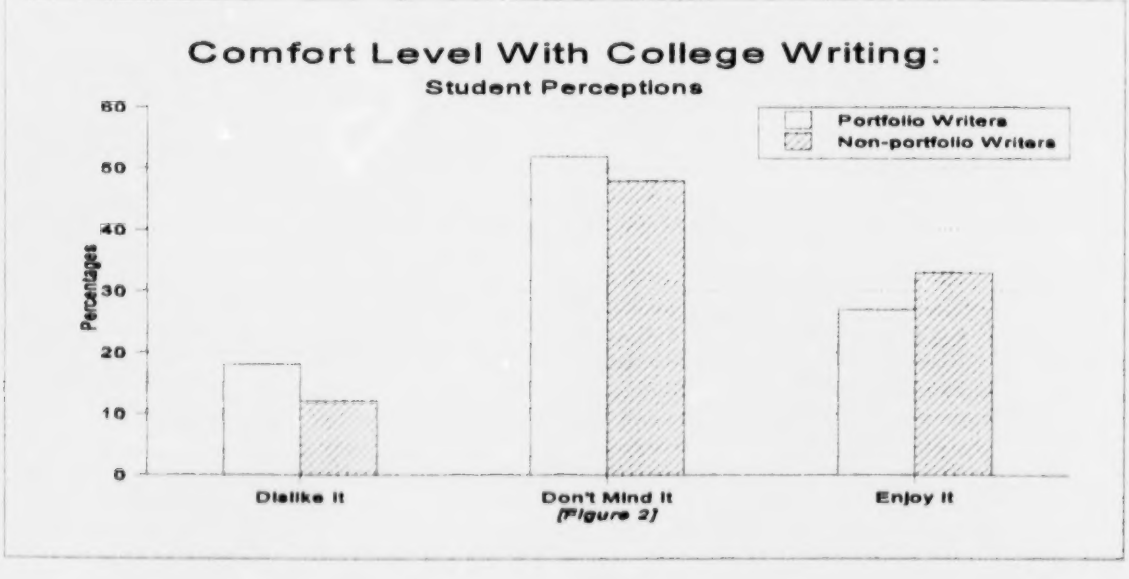
Student Survey Results

After student responses were grouped according to those who had completed a high school portfolio and those who had not, the next step was to compare their perceptions about the amount of writing they had done in high school and their subsequent comfort level with college writing. One might assume that portfolio students would have experienced more writing and, consequently, would feel more comfortable than non-portfolio writers about college writing. We discovered this to be partially true. As the graphs below indicate, a higher percentage of portfolio writers (88%) than non-portfolio writers (53%) *did* perceive themselves as having written "much" in high school [Fig. 1], but, on balance, there was little difference in the respective comfort level with college writing. While a slightly higher percentage of portfolio writers (18% vs. 12%) expressed uneasiness about college



[Figure 1]

writing, far more expressed either enjoyment (27%) or nonchalance (52%) about it [Fig. 2].



[Figure 2]

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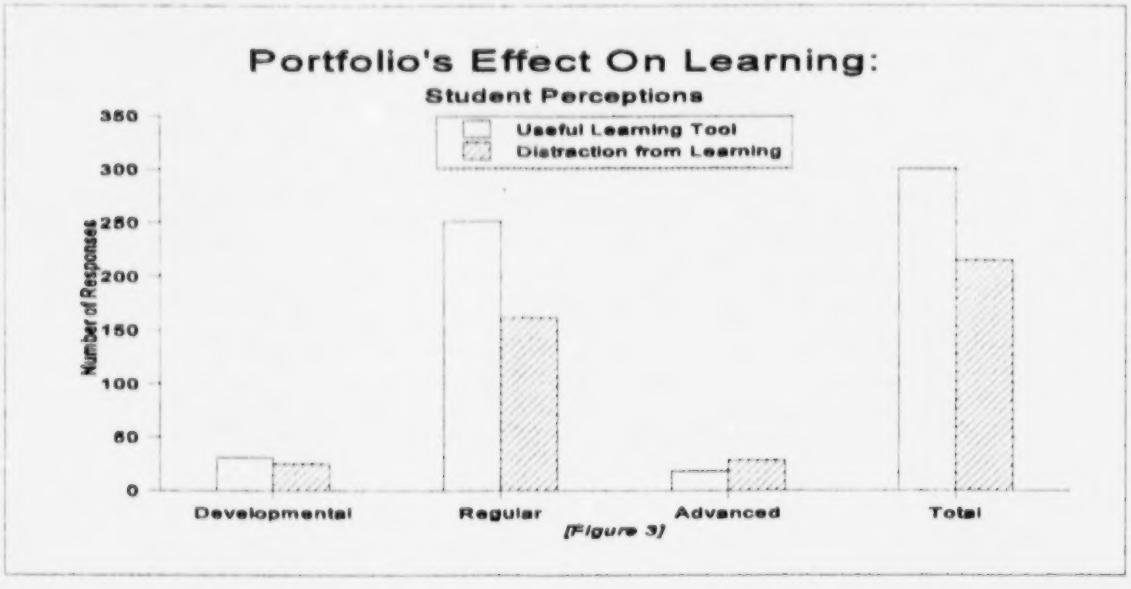
More reassuring data emerge, however, as we focus on just portfolio writers' more specific perceptions of their writing experiences. For this set of data, we find it interesting to divide the responses by the type of first-year writing class: developmental, regular, or advanced. Instead of percentages, the comparisons below are given in raw numbers and provide a total profile as well.

Students who had completed a high school writing portfolio were asked first to indicate which of two statements seemed to describe that experience: whether portfolio preparation demonstrated that writing could be *used as a learning tool* or seemed to *distract from learning more than enhance it.*



[Figure 3]

Explanation of advanced students' responses (slightly more of a distraction than a learning tool) may be the subject of separate exploration, but, overall, it seems clear [Fig. 3] that more students (58%) perceived the portfolio as a learning tool than a distraction (41%).

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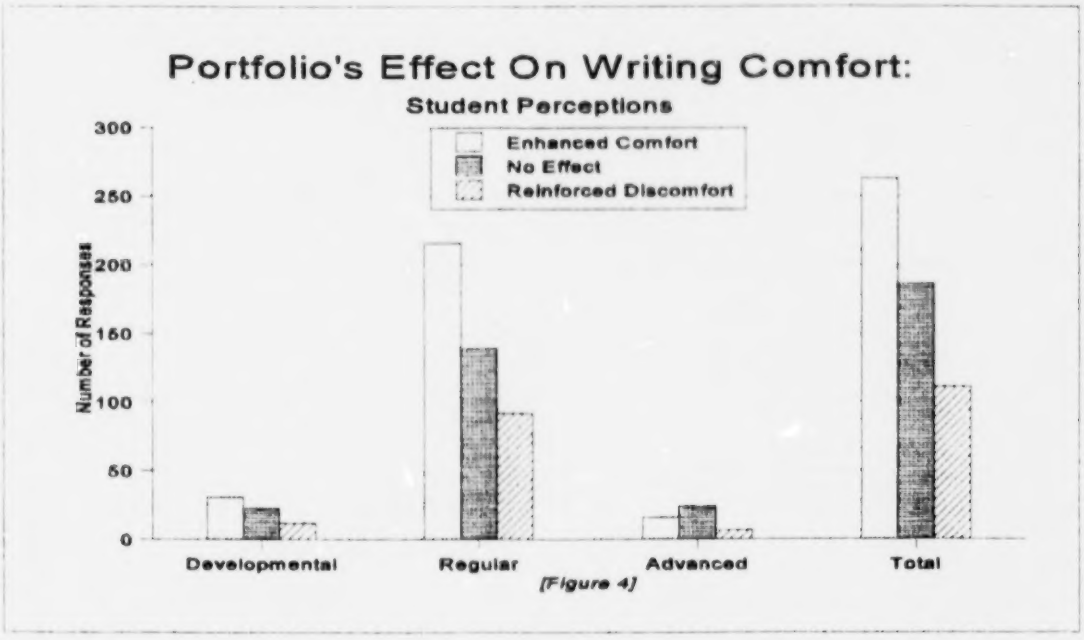
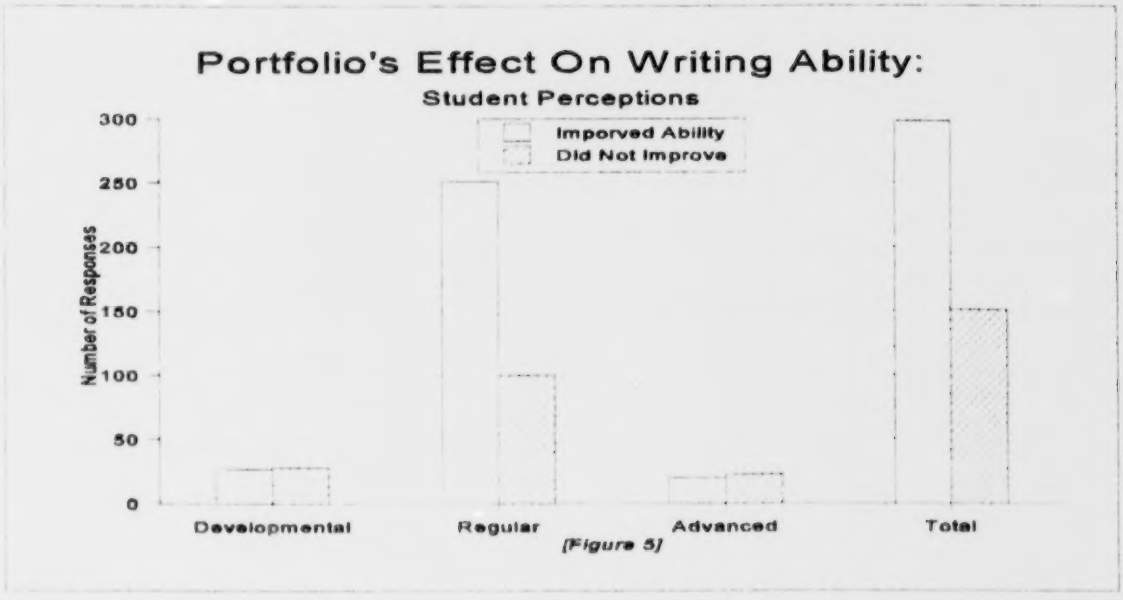
The next question focused on the effect of the portfolio experience on writing comfort level: whether it *enhanced comfort, reinforced discomfort*, or had *no effect* at all. Again, the aberration seems to be among advanced writers, but generally, a greater number of portfolio writers, upon opportunity for more specific reflection, clarified the earlier question about comfort level by reporting the experience as having enhanced their comfort with writing [Fig. 4].



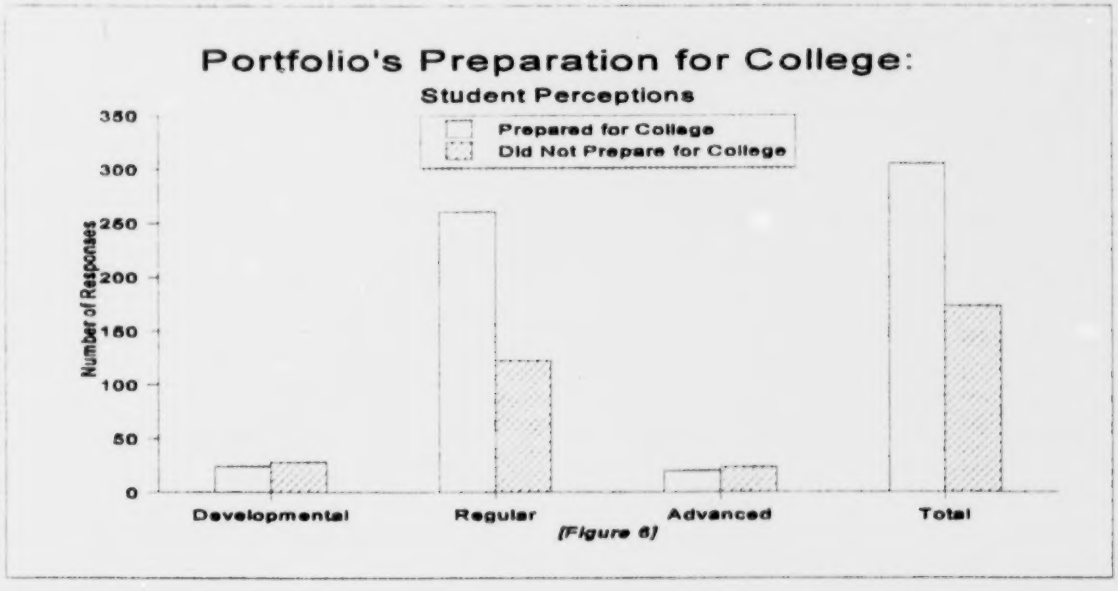
[Figure 4]

The impact of the portfolio experience on writing ability was the next inquiry. This time, developmental students responded more like advanced students in their mixed enthusiasm, but the overall balance was heavily in favor (298 or 66% vs. 151 or 34%) of the perception that preparing a high school writing portfolio had improved writing ability [Fig. 5].



[Figure 5]

The final query in this group explored the portfolio's effect on *preparation for college*. While developmental and advanced students again showed slightly less confidence, the general population seemed more convinced (305 or 64% vs. 173 or 36%) of the value of the experience [Fig. 6].



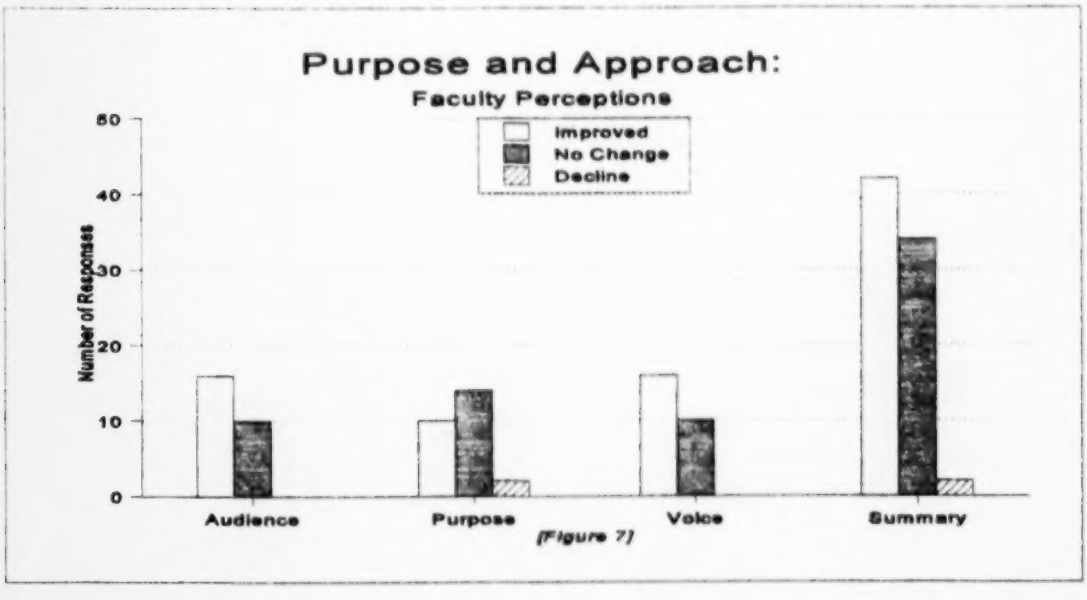
[Figure 6]

How can this data be interpreted and summarized? One generalization could be that freshman portfolio writers tell us, "We wrote more in high school than non-portfolio writers, and that has paid off in helping us learn, become more comfortable with writing, become better writers, and prepare us for college."

Faculty Survey Results

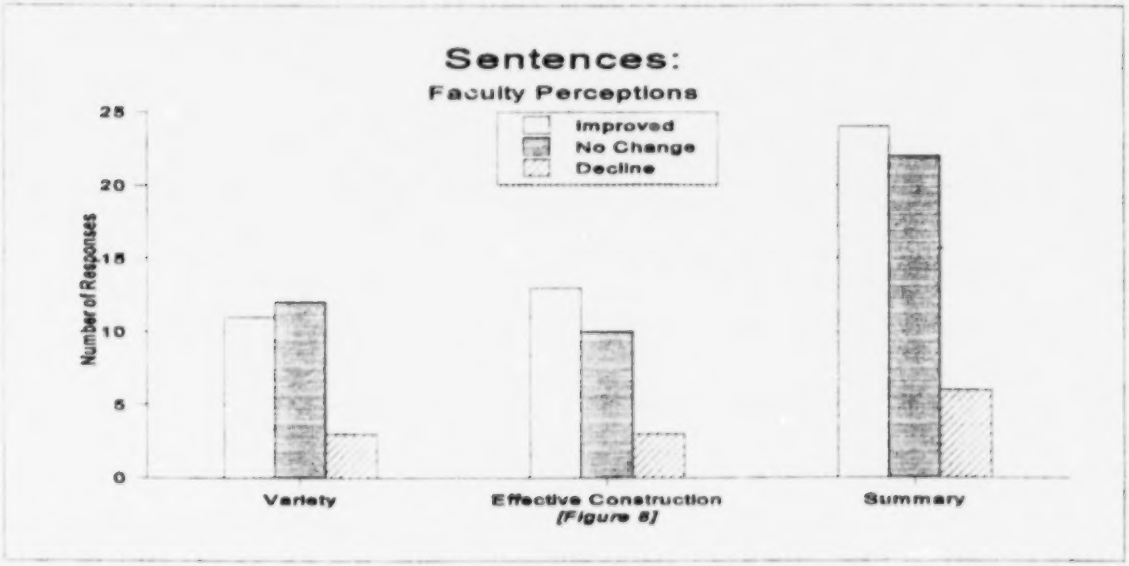
Since student and faculty perspectives don't always agree, we asked Morehead State University writing faculty to consider the past five years' freshman classes to describe whether they have witnessed *improvement*, *no change*, or *decline* in three areas: writing skills, knowledge of the writing process, and comfort with writing. To analyze the first category, "writing skills," we used KIRIS Holistic Scoring Guide descriptors, since, presumably, those features are the accepted rubric for Kentucky high school portfolio writers.

Of those descriptors, the categories in which a greater number of faculty members perceived improvement in first-year writers are *Purpose and Approach* [Fig. 7] subdivided into *awareness*



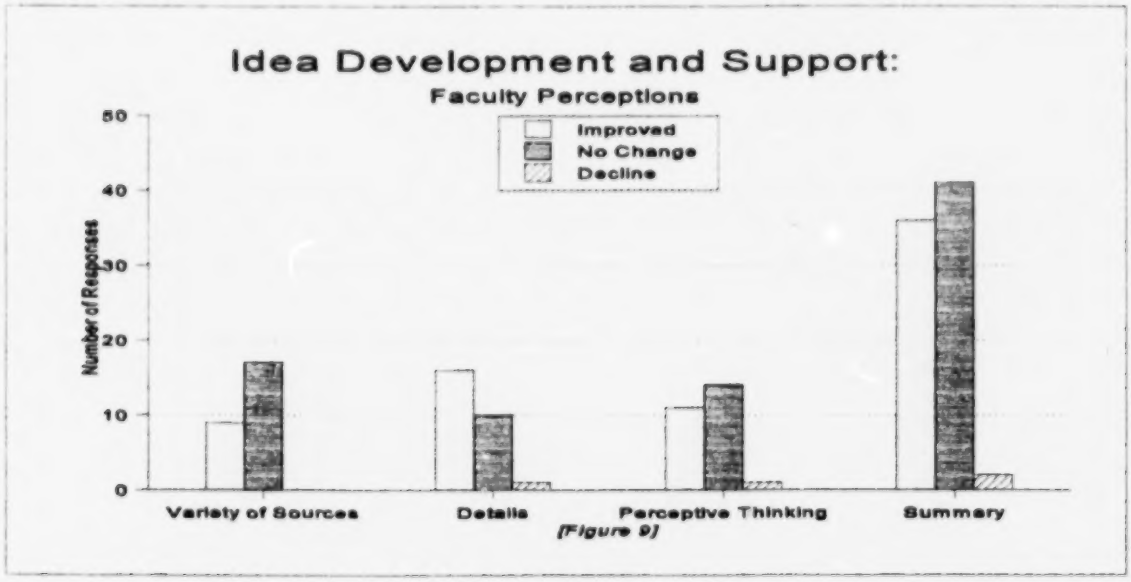
(Figure 7)

of audience, establishing and maintaining purpose, and *the evidence of voice* and in *Sentences*, subdivided into *variety* and *effectiveness of construction* [Fig. 8].



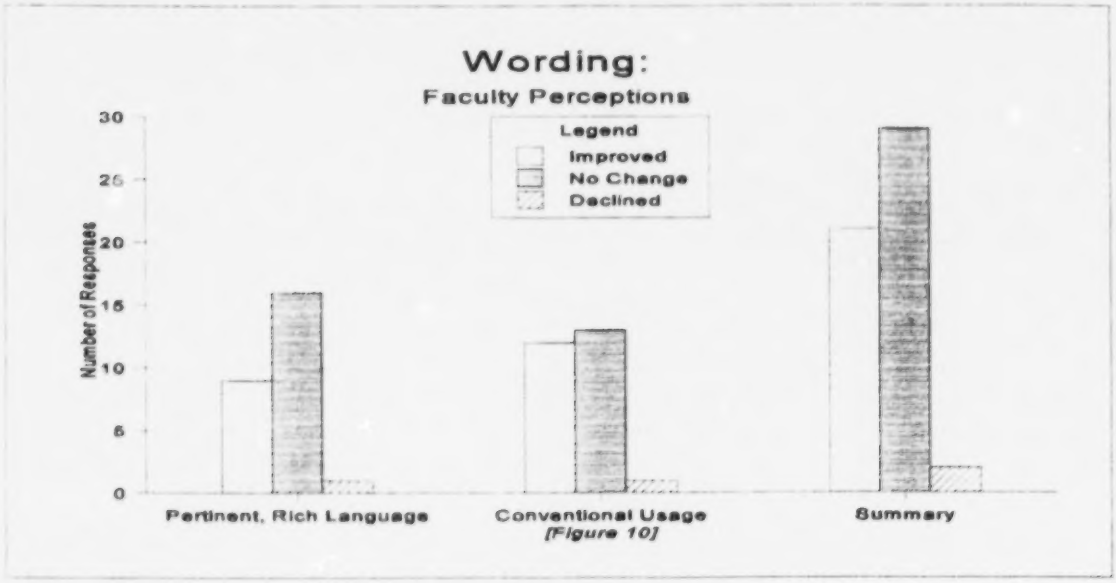
[Figure 8]

Criteria in which more faculty perceived stability (with still a significant number reporting improvement and very few reporting decline) were *Idea Development and Support* [Fig.9] and



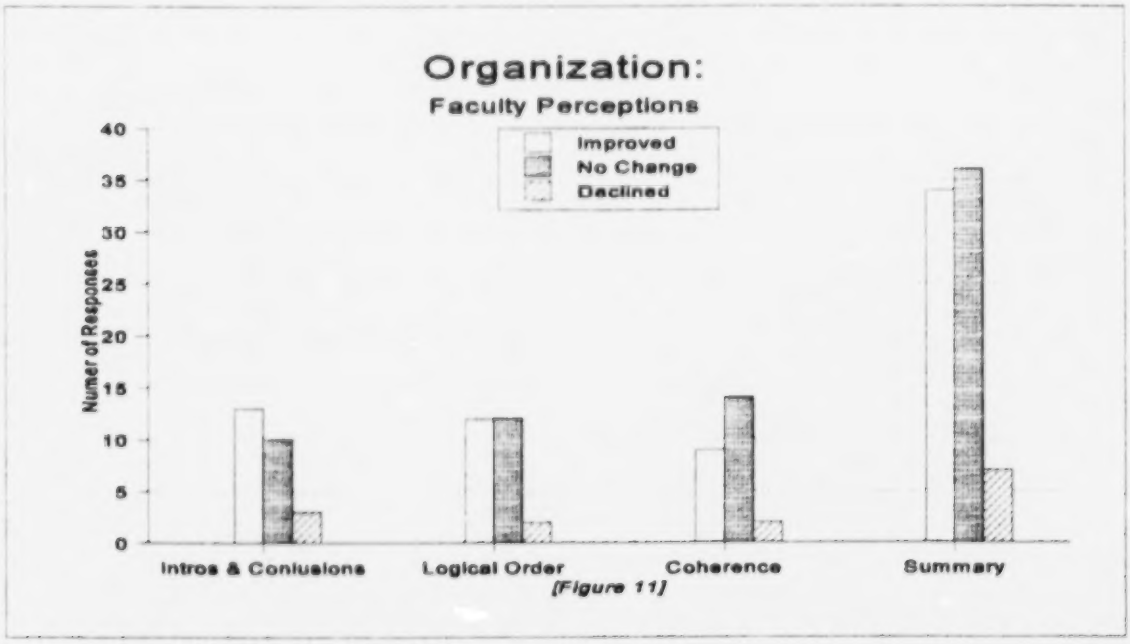
[Figure 9]

Wording [Fig. 10] with descriptive subdivisions indicated in the graphs.



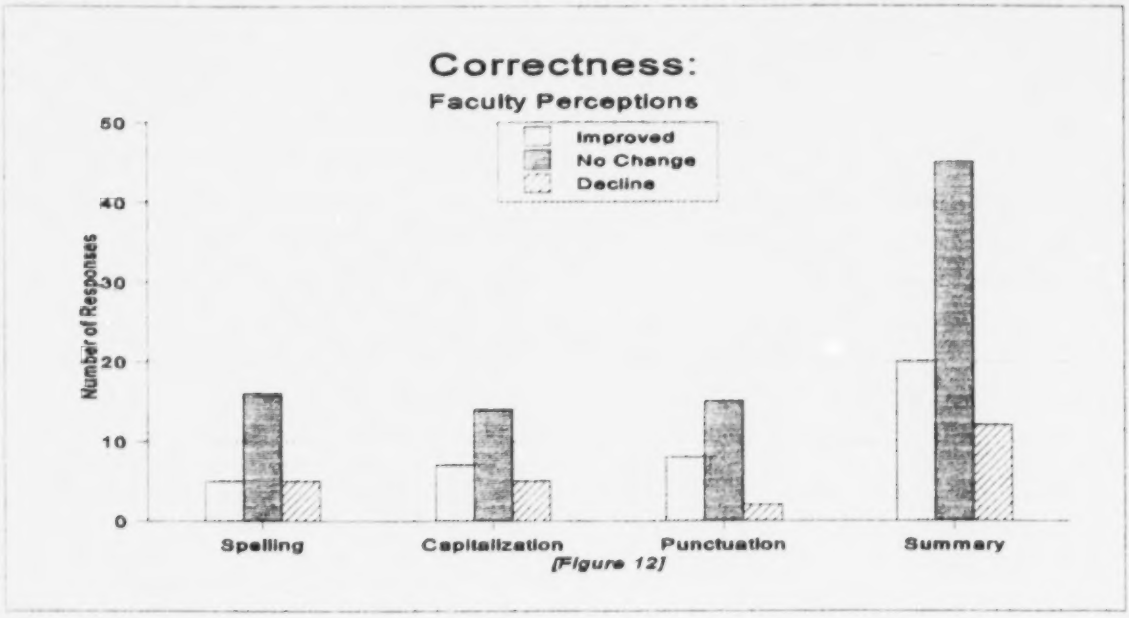
[Figure 10]

Finally, the skill categories in which a few more faculty perceived decline (but most still, reported improvement or no change) were *Organization* [Fig. 11] and *Correctness* [Fig 12]. It is



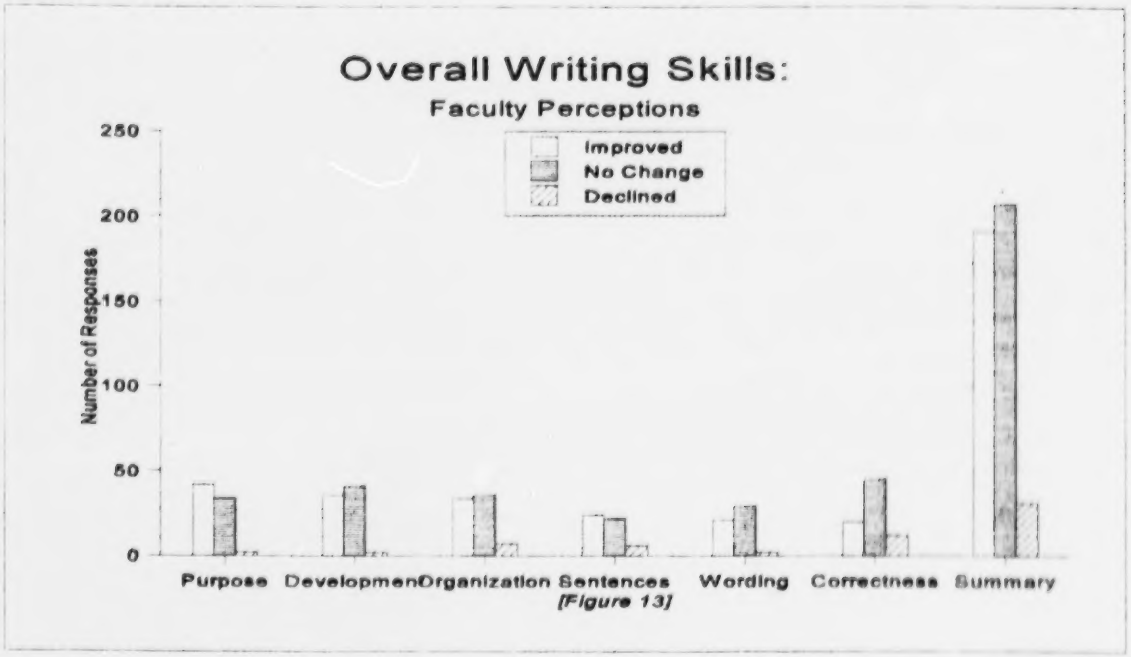
[Figure 11]

noteworthy, however, that, even in the categories in which a few reported decline, the number of those who perceived improvement still exceeded, in all but one case, the number who perceived decline. The one exception is *spelling,* in which an equal number of five report improvement and decline but sixteen report no change--an overall neutral result.



[Figure 12]

A summary graph [Fig. 13] shows that the total responses on faculty perceptions about first-year students' writing *skills* over the past five years suggest a sense of improvement (43%) that almost equals the sense of consistency (50%), and both far outweigh a sense of decline (7%). If such data do not warrant celebration, they may at least justify a tentative sigh of relief to counteract the popular myth that KERA methods have already subverted basic skills.



[Figure 13]

Nevertheless, of just as great importance, perhaps, as faculty perceptions on *skills* of first-year writers are their perceptions of changes in student *attitudes* toward and *understanding* of writing. It is in these areas that our survey showed the most dramatic results.

First we asked faculty members to rate the kinds of changes they've seen in the past five years in students' knowledge of the writing process by describing their *familiarity with planning techniques*, their *willingness to engage in multiple revisions*, and their *understanding the difference in revising and editing* [Fig. 14]. Here we find the greatest affirmation of improvement. The improvement responses in those categories totaled fifty-seven (72.2%) and no-change responses twenty (25.3%) with only two indications of decline (2.5%).

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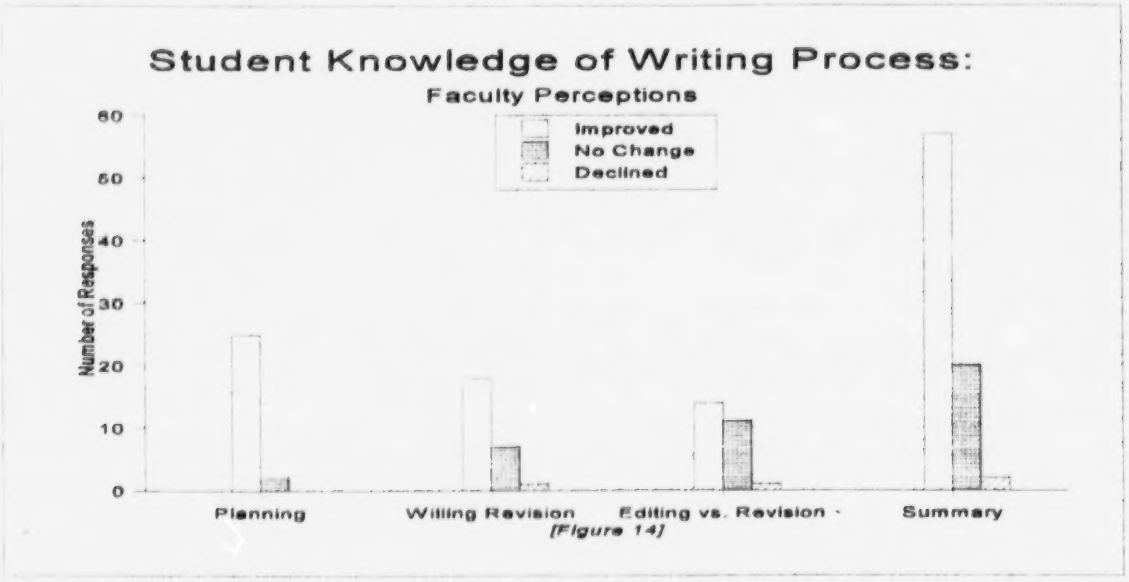
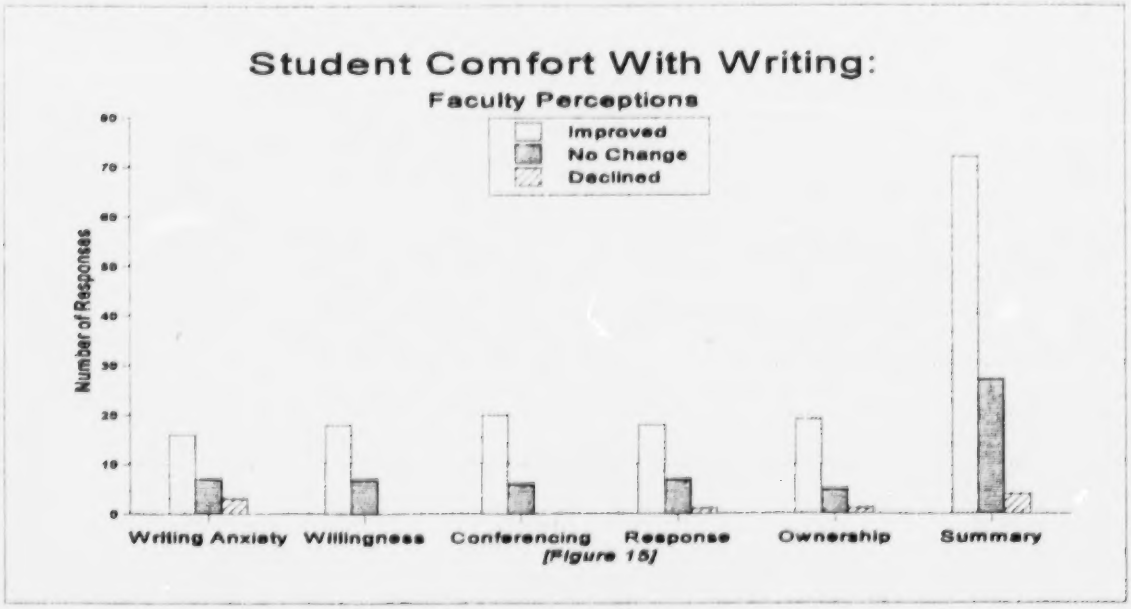


[Figure 14]

A similar affirmation emerged from reflection on students' comfort with writing, for which faculty rated first-year writers' apparent *anxiety toward writing, willingness to write, interaction in individual and group conferencing, responsiveness to feedback,* and *sense of ownership and accomplishment* [Fig. 15] with 70% improvement perceptions, 26% no change, and 4% decline.



[Figure 15]

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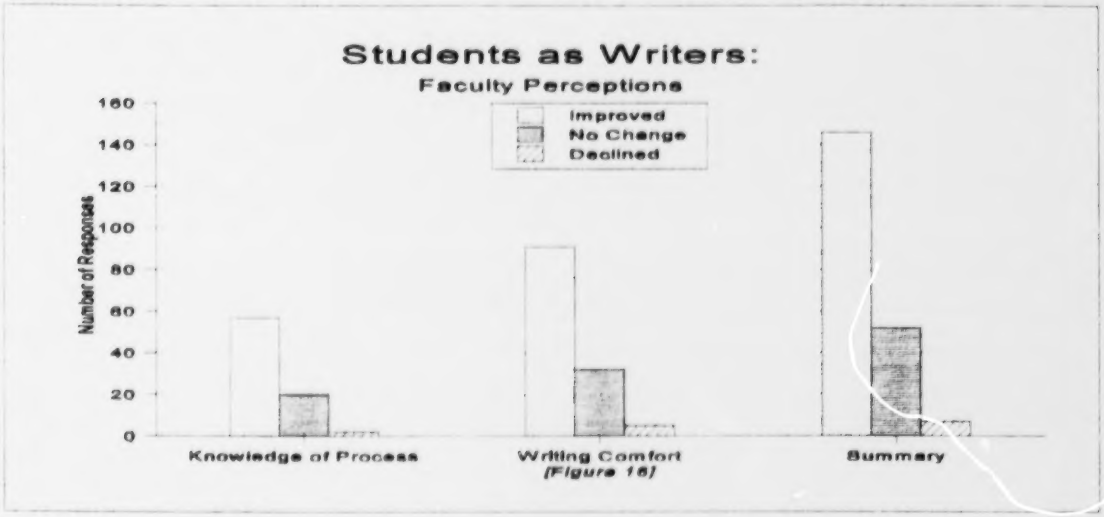
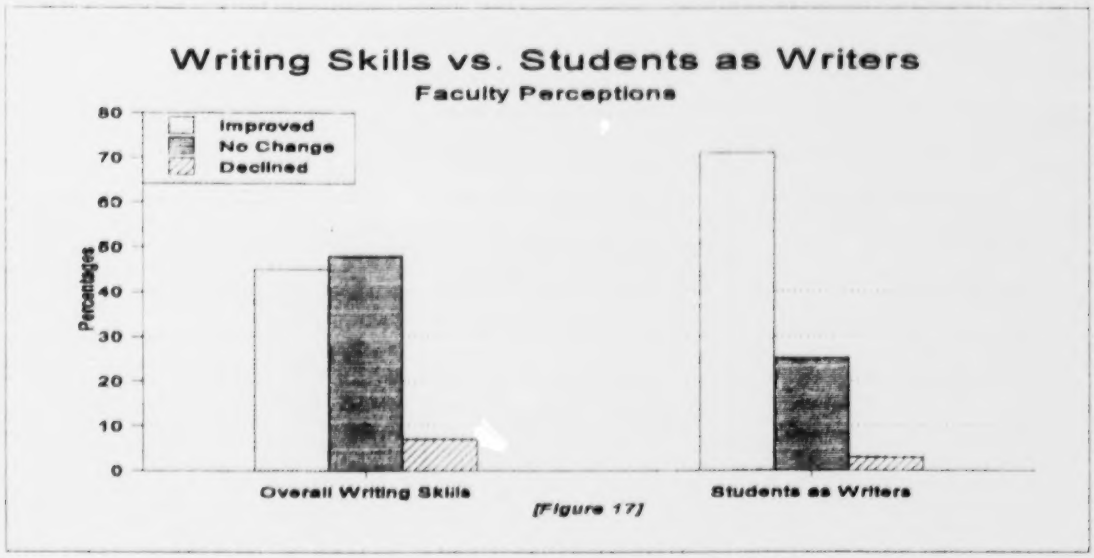
A combination of these two categories, knowledge of the writing process and comfort with writing, may be labelled "students as *writers*" to be distinguished from their writing *skills* [Fig. 16].



One final graph [Fig. 17] sums up MSU's writing faculty perceptions about first-year writers. While in skills the rate of perceived improvement was 45%, no change 48%, and decline 7%, the



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perception of improvement in students as writers was 71%, with 25% no change and 3% decline.

A generalization about faculty perceptions might suggest, "Contrary to some popular opinion, we have seen freshman writers fairly evenly holding their own or improving in basic *skills*, with many more of us seeing improvement in the past five years than decline. However, when it comes to *being writers*, first-year college students are demonstrating significant improvement in understanding the writing process and showing more comfort with writing."

Perhaps, in only five years since the first round of portfolios, that is gratifying enough. And perhaps, if perceiving themselves as writers and understanding the process come first, even greater improvement in product will follow. That remains to be seen.